

Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Debunking the Mythology

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to publish this forty-sixth volume in the *Occasional Paper* series of the United States Air Force Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). This paper is a capstone document on two levels. First, it is a linked follow-on to Steve Lambert's (with Dave Miller) *Russia's Crumbling Tactical Nuclear Weapons Complex: An Opportunity for Arms Control* (INSS Occasional Paper 12, April 1997). That paper was derived from their Naval Postgraduate School thesis, and it was selected for the award of the INSS Linhard Outstanding Researcher Award. Second, this current paper also caps a remarkable series of closely related research by the team of John Cappello, Gwen Hall, and Steve Lambert. They previously wrote *A Post-Cold War Nuclear Strategy Model* (INSS Occasional Paper 20, July 1998—also a Linhard Award winner); "US Counter-proliferation Strategy for a New Century" (in *Searching for National Security in an NBC World*, INSS July 2000); and "Triad 2025: The Evolution of a New Strategic Force Posture" (in *Nuclear Deterrence and Defense: Strategic Considerations*, February 2001; a version was also published under that same title in *National Security Studies Quarterly*, Spring 2001). This paper brings both tracks full circle back to "tactical" nuclear weapons. While this topic is addressed in much more exhausting detail in Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kurt J. Klingenberg, eds. *Controlling Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons: Obstacles and Opportunities* (INSS, July 2001), this paper offers a concise summary of many of the difficult issues presented in addressing this category of weapons within nuclear policy and posture, and particularly within the arms control arena. Its four direct findings are worthy of full consideration and debate as we rethink the place and role of tactical nuclear weapons.

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(XPXP). The research leading to the papers in this volume was sponsored by OSD/NA, DTRA, and XONP. The mission of the Institute is “to promote national security research for the Department of Defense within the military academic community, and to support national security education.” Its research focuses on the areas of greatest interest to our organizational sponsors: arms control and strategic security; counterproliferation, force protection, and homeland security; air and space issues and planning; information operations and information warfare; and regional and emerging national security issues.

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JAMES M. SMITH
Director

TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS: DEBUNKING THE MYTHOLOGY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper closes out a series of projects already completed by the authors to review nuclear weapons and deterrence strategy in the post-Cold War world. Previous research addressed the overall numbers of nuclear forces, deterring chemical and biological threats, and incorporating national and missile defenses. In this project, the authors acknowledge the special psychological properties of nuclear weapons (regardless of yield and range) and the fact that detonation of any nuclear weapon, to include a tactical nuclear weapon, would be a “strategic” event. The paper reviews the many concerns attached to tactical nuclear systems over time, to include recent concerns about security surrounding the Russian stockpile. Given all these issues, the authors propose that tactical nuclear forces be seen in the context of current and future security needs, and that the US not limit its own security needs because of problems with the Russian arsenal.

A recommendation to integrate all nuclear weapons into the US nuclear framework is made to enhance deterrence and provide a credible response to a variety of threats to US interests, and to continue the critical trans-Atlantic link between the US and NATO. This accepts both the military and political value of nuclear weapons without distinguishing between them because of yield, range, target effect, delivery vehicles, or deployment location. This is especially important in an environment of declining numbers of strategic nuclear systems and the incorporation of missile defenses. Recent events have demonstrated the difficulty of formal arms control agreements aimed at strategic systems and circumstances of the past and the need to address future threats and situations. Further, the Bush administration’s reaction to the ABM Treaty, particularly the rationale provided, suggests that bilateral arms control initiatives will not be as successful in the future as they were during the Cold War.

The paper concludes with four findings recommending that US nuclear strategy evolve to include all nuclear systems so they are part of a comprehensive nuclear posture. The first finding acknowledges the lack of Russian incentive to engage in traditional arms control negotiations in any nuclear weapons category other than those in the strategic arena. This is primarily due to

weaknesses in Russian conventional forces. Second, even if the Russians were motivated to do so, it is not in the interest of the US or its allies to become entangled in further agreements on systems not previously captured in other treaties. This is the view of the current administration. Third, because of the first two findings it is clear that for the future, other engagements aside from traditional arms control measures, should be the solution for dealing with the Russian “problem.” And finally, though historically tactical nuclear systems have not been discussed when talking about the US nuclear arsenal, the US can enhance deterrence by integrating all US nuclear weapons into a comprehensive nuclear posture.